

# Dorothy Thompson: Cassandra Silenced by (American) Zionism

[John Wear](#)

Dorothy Thompson was an extremely successful reporter, writer, public speaker and radio broadcaster before and during World War II. This article examines Dorothy's life and career, and the precipitous decline in her fortunes after the war.

## Early Life

Dorothy Thompson was born on July 9, 1893 in Lancaster, New York, the oldest daughter of a Methodist minister. Dorothy's mother died when she was only seven years old. Although her father soon remarried, Dorothy did not get along with her father's new wife. To avoid further conflict, Dorothy moved to Chicago in 1908 to live with her father's two sisters.[\[1\]](#)

In Chicago, Dorothy attended a private secondary school and a two-year junior college where she was introduced to the theater, ballet, music and art exhibitions. She became a skilled debater, and learned to trust her own judgment while becoming independent of her father's influence. Dorothy returned to western New York in the fall of 1912 to attend Syracuse University. She quickly gained a reputation for intellectual intensity, graduating *cum laude* in only two years.[\[2\]](#)

Dorothy first worked at the Buffalo headquarters of the women's suffrage movement, where she used her verbal talents and fiery temperament on the road as a spokesperson and event coordinator. She next joined the National Social Unit Organization, whose mission was to empower and raise the standard of living for the urban poor. Disappointed with the results of her efforts, Dorothy on June 19, 1920 went to England to pursue her dream of becoming a writer.[\[3\]](#)

Dorothy's first article was rejected. However, after she traveled to Rome and then to Paris, five months later the International News Service began publishing many of her articles. She also worked for the American Red Cross, which sent her to Vienna and Budapest to write for American newspapers and magazines. The editor of the *Public Ledger* in Paris also agreed to give Dorothy the title of "special correspondent," which enabled her to write articles from central European countries. Within two years, Dorothy earned a reputation in the trade for a remarkable nose for news.[\[4\]](#)

Dorothy was offered a post in Berlin in late 1924 by the *Public Ledger* as the first female head of a news bureau in central Europe. Her narrative style advanced to new levels with guidance from Sinclair Lewis, her second husband. Lewis also promoted Dorothy's work to editors in the United States, and helped her secure a book contract with his publisher.[\[5\]](#) Dorothy's stories were now published through the combined syndicate of the *Public Ledger* and the *New York Evening Post*.[\[6\]](#)

## Dorothy Despised Hitler

By 1931 Dorothy Thompson had become a star of the foreign press corps, and had learned how to move audiences as a lecturer. *Cosmopolitan* assigned her in November 1931 to interview Adolf Hitler. Dorothy described her first meeting with Hitler:

*When finally I walked into Adolf Hitler's salon in the Kaiserhof Hotel, I was convinced that I was meeting the future dictator of Germany. In something less than 50 seconds I was quite sure that I was not. It took just that time to measure the startling insignificance of this man who has set the whole world agog.* [7]

Dorothy said Hitler was "the very prototype of the Little Man." She found it unlikely that the German people would be held in thrall by someone she considered to be an insecure demagogue. [8]

In March 1933, a Jewish news agency unexpectedly assigned Dorothy for an up-to-the-minute report on what she called "the German inferno." After a fire on February 27, 1933 had partially destroyed the Reichstag, Hitler pronounced it a Communist plot. By decree, President Paul Hindenburg suspended free speech, a free press and other liberties, leaving National-Socialist storm troopers free to rampage. Dorothy wrote to Sinclair Lewis:

*Hitler gets up and speaks about German unity and German loyalty and the new era, and the S.A. boys have simply turned into gangs and beat up people on the streets...and take socialists and communists and pacifists & Jews into so-called "Braune Etagen" [brown floors] where they are tortured. Italian fascism was a kindergarten compared to it. It's an outbreak of sadistic and pathological hatred. Most discouraging of all is not only the defenselessness of the liberals but their incredible (to me) docility.* [9]

Dorothy was sent to Europe again in July 1934. After only 10 days in Berlin, she was ordered to leave the country for journalistic activities inimical to Germany. The reasons given for the order were primarily Dorothy's Hitler interview, which was published in 1932, and secondarily the reports she had written in 1933 describing and condemning Hitler's alleged anti-Semitic campaign. Dorothy decided to leave for Paris by train on August 25. Her expulsion from Germany was front-page news in America. Dorothy had the expulsion order framed and hung it on her wall as a proud trophy. [10]

### **Dorothy Opposed Charles Lindbergh**

Dorothy Thompson was deluged with speaking invitations after her dramatic ouster from Germany. Her lectures drew impressive crowds everywhere she went. Dorothy was often introduced as the "First Lady of American Journalism" on the speaker's platform. [11]

She began her own syndicated newspaper column in 1936. For the next four years, most of what Dorothy wrote took the form of attacks on National-Socialist Germany. Dorothy also attacked others who downplayed Germany's threat to the world. She wrote: "The spectacle of great, powerful, rich, democratic nations capitulating hour-by-hour to banditry, extortion, intimidation and violence is the most terrifying and discouraging sight in the world today. It is more discouraging than the aggression itself." [12]

Dorothy was always passionately anti-Nazi. Following the Austrian *Anschluss* of 1938, for example, Dorothy said that she would have given her life to save Austria from the Nazis. None of her friends doubted she meant it. [13] What Dorothy ignored, however, is that in a fair and democratic election, Austrian voters would have voted overwhelmingly to join Germany. Such a fair election never took place because Austrian Chancellor Dr. Kurt von Schuschnigg did not allow it to happen. [14]

Dorothy felt that war against Germany was a fight between good and evil, and that the United States had a moral obligation to intercede. The fierceness of her beliefs contributed to her savage assault on American pacifist Charles Lindbergh. She wrote in her column that Lindbergh was "a somber cretin," a

man “without human feeling,” and a “pro-Nazi recipient of a German medal.” While acknowledging that she had no proof, Dorothy even charged that Lindbergh had “a notion to be the American Fuehrer.”[\[15\]](#)

Dorothy’s column, as well as other press criticism of Lindbergh’s famous anti-interventionist speech at an America First Committee rally, contributed to a torrent of hate mail against Lindbergh. Lindbergh’s wife, Anne, remembered the tragic kidnapping and murder of her 20-month-old son in March 1932. Anne Lindbergh wrote in her diary: “We are thrown back again into that awful atmosphere...One can’t take a chance. I feel angry and bitter and trapped again. Where can we live, where can we go?”[\[16\]](#)

Despite the threats to his family, Lindbergh was determined to continue his fight against American involvement in the war. Lindbergh wrote in his journal: “I feel I must do this, even if we have to put an armed guard in the house. It is a fine state of affairs in a country which feels it is civilized: people dislike what you do, so they threaten to kill your children.”[\[17\]](#)

Dorothy also received many threatening letters after her anti-Lindbergh columns. However, similar to Lindbergh, Dorothy refused to be cowed by these hostile and menacing letters. She attacked Lindbergh in four columns in 1939, followed by six in 1940, and four in 1941.[\[18\]](#)

Dorothy continued to promote America’s entry into the war. Her syndicated column, “On the Record,” was carried by 200 newspapers across the country, and had a tremendous impact. She hammered away three times a week at the necessity for America’s entry into the war. Dorothy also traveled to Great Britain in the fall of 1941 to visit bomb shelters, munitions factories, hospitals, orphanages and schools. She even addressed the House of Commons, and “received” the leaders of the current governments-in-exile.[\[19\]](#)

## **War Years**

Dorothy undertook an active role once America entered the war. She wrote President Roosevelt asking for a propaganda assignment with the Office of War Information. In the *Ladies Home Journal*, Dorothy wrote that public-funded day-care centers should be established to help women cope with working in war industries. In the spring of 1942, Dorothy won her heart’s desire when William Paley at CBS commissioned her to lead an anti-Nazi propaganda campaign. Paley asked Dorothy to organize a radio project that would deliver broadcasts via shortwave directly into Germany.[\[20\]](#)

For the CBS radio series, Dorothy brought on board theologian Paul Tillich, Professor Dietrich von Hildebrand of Fordham University; Max Werner, an expert on Russia and author of *The Great Offensive*; and Horst von Baerensprung, a former German police chief with powerful anti-Nazi credentials. Dorothy’s speeches, which she made in German, were essentially extended sermons on the evils of Nazism and the inevitability of German defeat. Dorothy wrote to her agent, “I know that the President wants me on the air because he told me so.”[\[21\]](#)

Dorothy’s speeches were brimful of argument, history, analysis, and polemic, and carried with them an air of rippling enjoyment. There is no question that her speeches hit their mark when they were transmitted into Germany. In his own radio broadcasts, Joseph Goebbels denounced Dorothy Thompson as “the scum of America,” and wondered in his diary how “such dumb broads” were permitted to criticize “an historic figure of the greatness of the Fuehrer.”[\[22\]](#)

As the war went on, however, Dorothy became increasingly averse to Allied policy. Dorothy dated her “profound alienation” with Allied policy beginning in January 1943, when Roosevelt and Churchill met in Casablanca and demanded unconditional surrender by the Germans and the Japanese. She regarded this ultimatum as “a barbarity,” “an absurdity,” and “an insanity.” She was convinced to the end of her life that this Allied policy prolonged the war by at least a year, since it deprived “the forces in Germany that were anxious for peace” of any possible means of achieving it. [23]

In the months to come, Dorothy was forced to realize that she was seriously out of step with policy in America. In 1944 U.S. Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau, Jr. devised a plan to divide Germany when the war was over, with plans to strip Germany of her industrial capacity, and transform the nation into a purely agricultural state. Dorothy called Morgenthau “an amorphous ass.” She wondered what Morgenthau proposed to do “with 30 or 40 million Germans who cannot possibly become peasants. Put them all on WPA?” [24]

Dorothy was also disgusted with the “Hollywoodizing” of the war. It was forbidden in the United States, for example, to show film of American soldiers killed on the battlefield. She was also fearful of the effects of depicting Germans as “stock villains” and Japanese as “toothy apes.” Dorothy asked: “How did Americans think Hitler had sold his particular brand of anti-Semitism to the Germans? Her answer: “Through cartoons, and the cartoon equivalent.” [25]

### **Postwar Suppression**

Having begun the war as America’s undisputed primary agitator against the Nazis, Dorothy became a strong voice in defense of the (surviving) Germans after the war. She judged the Yalta Conference, and all of the Allied postwar conferences, to be “a 100% Russian victory.” Dorothy was horrified that an estimated 15 million German expellees, of whom at least 2 million died, were forced to leave their ancestral homes after the war. She was also highly critical of the Nuremberg trials. Dorothy wrote about the Nuremberg trials, “Everything of which the defendants stood accused and were convicted, is being done today by one or another of the accusers.” [26]

Dorothy in 1943 had unequivocally endorsed the concept of a Jewish national home. However, her zeal for the cause evaporated after her visit to Palestine in 1945. Dorothy learned that organized groups of Jewish extremists were using terror to frighten Palestinian Arabs and cause large numbers of them to flee their homeland. She began to voice concern in her column for the Arab refugees, and dismay at the tactics of the Jewish terrorists. Dorothy’s utterances against Jewish terrorism were viciously resisted by Zionist organizations. [27]

As a result of these views, the *New York Post* dropped her column in early 1947, resulting in the loss of a full quarter of her income. The bitterest blow for Dorothy was the discovery that Zionists equated criticism of their policies with anti-Semitism. Dorothy disputed the Zionists’ labeling of her as an anti-Semite, recalling not only her long record of benevolence to Jewish refugees, but also her steadfast fight against Hitler. Indeed, in her personal and public life, Dorothy’s stance had always been—and remained—the antithesis of an anti-Semite. [28]

Dorothy reached the view that a theocracy was inherently wrong, and that the existence of Israel would lead to endless conflict in the Mideast. Some important papers refused to publish her most-partisan columns, while many other papers cancelled her contract with them. Dorothy regarded herself as the

persecuted victim of a Zionist conspiracy. By the 1950s, Dorothy was weary and out of sympathy with the society in which she lived, and she longed for the world of simple Christian values in which she had grown up. One friend said, “Politically, she was like a great ship left stranded on the beach after the tide had gone out.”[\[29\]](#)

Dorothy wrote her last column on August 22, 1958. She wrote in her farewell column:

*This column has set an endurance record of continuous comment on major public affairs surpassed only by those written by David Lawrence and Walter Lippmann. During one third of my life—21 years— “On the Record” has been written three times a week, and for the last 17 years, 50 weeks annually. For almost as long a time I have contributed a monthly essay to the Ladies’ Home Journal.... When I became a young foreign correspondent for the Philadelphia Ledger, I received but one instruction: Get the news accurately. If possible get it first. Don’t let your likes or dislikes obscure the facts, and remember the laws of libel and slander.*[\[30\]](#)

## Conclusion

Eight publishers promptly expressed interest in Dorothy Thompson’s autobiography after her retirement as a columnist. Weary and suffering from a multitude of physical ailments, Dorothy never wrote her autobiography. She died in Lisbon on January 30, 1961.[\[31\]](#)

Dorothy’s column “On the Record” was not merely a success; it was a smash hit. At its peak in 1940, her column was read by seven-and-one-half million people. For a while, Dorothy was the most quotable of all the national pundits. She was also a highly successful lecturer, and received a lucrative position as a free-lance radio commentator with NBC.[\[32\]](#)

Dorothy’s effective popularity declined dramatically once she began to criticize Zionism. Dorothy wrote in the winter of 1950:

*The Zionists would like us all to believe that there is no such thing as an Arab. They also have adopted the attitude that the State of Israel, unlike every other state on earth, is sacrosanct, and outside any criticism whatsoever. This is the more irritating since the Jewish people as a whole have never been reticent in their criticisms of every other state and society on the globe.*[\[33\]](#)

This and similar statements caused Dorothy to be described in the Jewish press as “a traitor,” “a Goebbels-minded publicity agent,” and “a mercenary, ill-motivated agent for the heirs of Nazism.” For her part, Dorothy believed that she was the victim of “a campaign of character assassination” unmatched in her 30 years of journalism.[\[34\]](#) As with other writers and researchers, Dorothy Thompson learned that anyone who criticizes Zionism or Israel will suffer severe consequences from Zionist organizations.

## Endnotes

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[\[1\]](#) Hertog, Susan, *Dangerous Ambition: Rebecca West and Dorothy Thompson*, New York: Ballantine Books, 2011, pp. 50-58.

- [2] *Ibid.*, pp. 58-60.
- [3] *Ibid.*, pp. 60-63.
- [4] *Ibid.*, pp. 63-66.
- [5] *Ibid.*, pp. 72, 102-103.
- [6] Kurth, Peter, *American Cassandra: The Life of Dorothy Thompson*, Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1990, p. 95.
- [7] Sanders, Marion K., *Dorothy Thompson: A Legend in Her Time*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1973, pp. 164, 167.
- [8] *Ibid.*, p. 168.
- [9] *Ibid.*, pp. 184-185.
- [10] *Ibid.*, pp. 195-199.
- [11] *Ibid.*, pp. 203, 206-207, 223.
- [12] Olson, Lynne, *Those Angry Days: Roosevelt, Lindbergh, and America's Fight over World War II, 1939-1941*, New York: Random House, 2013, p. 78.
- [13] Kurth, Peter, *American Cassandra: The Life of Dorothy Thompson*, Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1990, p. 241.
- [14] Wear, John, *Germany's War: The Origins, Aftermath and Atrocities of World War II*, Upper Marlboro, Md.: American Free Press, 2014, pp. 117-120.
- [15] Olson, Lynne, *Those Angry Days: Roosevelt, Lindbergh, and America's Fight over World War II, 1939-1941*, New York: Random House, 2013, p. 79.
- [16] *Ibid.*
- [17] *Ibid.*, p. 80.
- [18] *Ibid.*
- [19] Sorel, Nancy Caldwell, *The Women Who Wrote the War*, New York: Arcade Publishing, Inc., 1999, pp. 125-127.
- [20] Kurth, Peter, *American Cassandra: The Life of Dorothy Thompson*, Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1990, pp. 358-360.
- [21] *Ibid.*, p. 360.
- [22] *Ibid.*, p. 361.
- [23] *Ibid.*, p. 364.
- [24] *Ibid.*, p. 365
- [25] *Ibid.*, pp. 365-366.

[26] *Ibid.*, pp. 358, 372, 376-378.

[27] Sanders, Marion K., *Dorothy Thompson: A Legend in Her Time*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1973, pp. 321-323.

[28] *Ibid.*, pp. 326-327.

[29] *Ibid.*, pp. 334, 339-341.

[30] *Ibid.*, p. 359.

[31] *Ibid.*, pp. 361, 369-371.

[32] Kurth, Peter, *American Casandra: The Life of Dorothy Thompson*, Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1990, pp. 209, 221, 225, 251.

[33] *Ibid.*, p. 422.

[34] *Ibid.*, pp. 422-423.

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| <b>Title:</b>     | Dorothy Thompson: Cassandra Silenced by (American) Zionism |
| <b>Sources:</b>   |  |
| <b>Dates:</b>     | published: 2020-04-24, first posted: 2020-04-24 17:57:35   |

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